How long are we going to wait?

When you say it's gonna happen now

Well, when exactly do you mean?

See, I've already waited too long

And all my hope is gone

EST

I’ve already replayed the opening line of this conversation seventeen times.

Good morning, Mr. Jakrapatr Kaewpanpong. I’m Est.

William? I’m Est. The publisher sent me.

Hi. I’m here to take your photo. Please don’t hate me.

None of them sound right. My bag feels twice as heavy as usual.

He’s not a subject. He’s a person. You see people better than anyone.

By the time I reached William’s building, the coffee Tui had bought me felt like it was vibrating in my veins instead of calming me down. The place was nicer than anywhere I’d ever lived—glass front, polished lobby, a faint smell of air freshener and money. My sneakers squeaked slightly on the shiny floor as I walked up to the reception desk, camera bag heavy on my shoulder. The building lobby smells like polished marble and faint air freshener, sterile, expensive, the kind of place that makes you feel underdressed even in your best black shirt. I shift my camera bag on my shoulder, the strap digging into my collarbone like a reminder: Don’t mess this up. Not on day one.

The doorman—a tall man with a crisp uniform and a name tag reading Mr. Somchai—looks up from his desk as I approach. He’s expecting me; the publisher sent ahead all the details, triple-checked. Still, my stomach twists when I give my name.

“Est Supha Sangaworawong?” His voice is polite but assessing, eyes flicking from my ID to my gear. “Right this way.”

He doesn’t touch the elevator button himself. Instead, he picks up a sleek black phone and murmurs into it, low and deferential. “He’s here.” A pause. Then: “Yes, sir.” Moments later, the elevator dings—not the public one, but a private car tucked in the corner, keycard access only. The doors slide open.

“Est?” a woman’s voice called before I could introduce myself. I turned.

She was already standing up from one of the lobby sofas—a woman in her late

thirties, sleek black bob, crisp white blouse tucked into dark trousers. A lanyard with an agency logo hung around her neck. Tablet under one arm. The kind of person who made you stand up straighter without knowing why.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m—”

“—the photographer,” she finished, crossing the lobby toward me. Her handshake was firm, businesslike. “I manage William’s contracts. We spoke on the phone.” Right. That voice. The one who’d reminded me twice about the no-flash rule and once about the fact that William could cancel “at any time if he feels unsafe.” “This way.” She says, leading me through.

“Thank you for being punctual. Follow me, please.” She presses the elevator button, scans her keycard, and we ride up in silence. Floor 18. Penthouse level. “He’s been… anxious about today. Let’s keep things as smooth as possible.”

“No flash, no surprise shots, no touching him without asking. He’s agreed to one hour, maybe less. If I say we’re done, we’re done.”

I nodded. “Understood.”

The elevator stopped on the twelfth floor with a soft chime. The hallway was quiet, carpeted, the kind of silence that made every sound feel too loud. Dao’s heels clicked softly; my sneakers barely whispered. We stopped at a faded blue wooden door with a small silver plate. No name. Just a number. I hear nothing from inside—no TV, no music, no movement. For a second, I wonder if he’s changed his mind.

The wait is endless. I count to sixty in my head. By fifty-eight, I’m already reaching for my phone to text Tui: I messed up. He won’t open the door.

Then I hear it: a lock turning. Slow. Deliberate. The door creaks open.

The door opened—not onto a men, but onto a woman in her fifties, small and solid, hair pulled back in a loose bun. She wore a faded house dress and soft slippers.

“Morning.” The agent said, her voice softening a fraction. “This is Est. The photographer.”

“Come inside.” The voice is quiet, but not unkind. Guarded. Her gaze flickers from the bag to my face, then to the camera bag slung over my shoulder. “Living room this way.”

the woman stood by the entrance, putting something on her tablet. "I'm leaving you here." she said. he turned around and closed the door leaving me alone with the older woman.

I slid my camera bag off my shoulder, suddenly acutely aware of every zipper sound. My fingers buzzed with the urge to start checking gear, but I forced them

still. Not yet. First, the person. The lady led the way down a short corridor. Framed photos lined the wall, most of them of plants and corners of the city, little vignettes of the quiet life. One caught my eye: a girl with long black hair in motion, mid-turn, laughing at something off camera. i noticed. The same face I had seen in William's online portfolio, painted over and over again. My chest tightened.

She paused on the threshold of the wide, sunlit room. "He's there." she murmured, stepping aside so he could see. “Good luck." I nod. Heart pounding. This is it. No more buffers. She steps aside. leaving us alone. I can hear the door closing after

The penthouse air hummed, Sunlight, filtered through floor-to-ceiling windows, laid stark rectangles across polished concrete, illuminating specks of dust that danced slowly, Heart heavy from lost hope yet flickering with quiet curiosity. My camera bag, a familiar weight, thudded softly as I set it down. A scent, a phantom whisper of turpentine and something else, violets, slightly floral. Sharp and clean, pricked at my nose. William. He stood by the panoramic view, a silhouette against the blinding sky, his back a rigid line. My stomach coiled, a nervous flutter I hadn't felt in years.

“Est, right?” His voice, a low rumble, cut through the quiet. He didn’t turn.

“That’s me.” My own voice, a little rougher than I intended, bounced off the vast emptiness of the room. I cleared my throat. “And you’re William.”

The word hangs between us. No handshake. No Nice to meet you. Just names, testing the air.

He finally faced me. My breath hitched. He was sharper than the city skyline behind him, all angles and shadows. Dark hair, falling just so over an intense gaze. His eyes, the color of a winter sky, held no warmth, only a profound, almost painful distance. He wore a loose charcoal sweater, the fabric clinging just enough to hint at the lean strength beneath. This man was a storm, contained. I glance around, taking in the details without staring: the faint bruise of insomnia under his eyes, the way his left knee bounces faintly, a small framed photo on the side table—a woman with his cheekbones, holding a Lego brick, smiling at the camera. The silence stretches. Not uncomfortable. Just… settling.

“You’re early.” His lips barely moved.

“Always am.” I forced a smile, stretching the muscles in my cheeks. “Gives me time to scout the light, get a feel for the space.” I gestured vaguely around the cavernous apartment. “Quite a space.”

“It’s big.” He offered nothing else.

“Big?” I laughed, a short, self-conscious puff of air. “This place is…a statement.” My gaze swept over the minimalist furniture, the abstract art on the walls, the single, massive easel draped with a canvas. “You paint, I hear.”

“Sometimes.” His eyes flickered to the easel, then back to me, an almost imperceptible tightening around them.

“Your agent said you needed shots for a new line. Something…raw.” I pulled my camera from its bag, the click of the lens hood snapping into place echoing loudly.

“Raw, yes.” He moved then, a deliberate, slow pace towards a low, concrete coffee table. He picked up a small, smooth stone, turning it over and over in his fingers. “My agent handles all that. I just…stand here.”

“Well, I’m good at making people look good standing there.” I aimed the camera, the black rectangle a shield between us. “Or sitting. Or leaning. Whatever feels right.”

“Nothing feels right.” He dropped the stone back onto the table. The small thud resonated.

He wasn’t what I expected. From the notes, from the way everyone talked about him—reclusive, fragile—I’d pictured someone almost ghostlike. But the person in front of me was solid. Real.

A silent conversation sparking between them as eyes locked in a clash of ego and vulnerability. The air was thick with unspoken words, a fragile tension crackling in every moment.

My fingers stilled on the camera’s dial. “Okay.” I lowered the lens. “Then let’s make ‘nothing feels right’ look captivating.” I walked closer, circling the table. “Tell me, William. What are we trying to capture here?”

He finally met my gaze, a challenge in his eyes. “Absence.”

“Absence?” I tilted my head. “That’s…abstract.”

“My work is abstract.” He crossed his arms, his posture defensive.

“I’ve seen it.” I nodded. “Powerful stuff. A lot of…weight. Emptiness, too, but a heavy emptiness.” I paused, letting my words hang in the air. “Is that what you want me to photograph? The weight of your absence?” I stared at him intently.

A flicker, a ghost of something unreadable, crossed his face. “Just get the shots.”

“I will.” I raised the camera again, framing him against the stark white wall. “But to get the ‘best’ shots, I need to understand. What’s in your head when you paint? When you create this…absence?”

He shifted, a restless energy stirring beneath his composed exterior. “Does it matter?”

“To me, it does.” I took a step back, widening the frame. “A photograph isn’t just a

pretty picture. It’s a story. And you, William, you look like you have a story to tell.”

His lips thinned. “I have no story.”

“Everyone has a story.” I clicked the shutter once, the sound a sharp punctuation mark. “Even the ones who think they don’t.” I moved around him, my feet silent on the polished floor. “Let’s start simple. Can you lean against the wall? Just relax into it.”

He hesitated, then slowly, almost reluctantly, shifted his weight, his shoulder blades pressing flat against the cool concrete. He didn’t relax. His body remained taut, like a coiled spring.

“Good.” I snapped another shot. “Now, look out the window. Like you’re seeing something for the first time. Or the last.”

He turned his head, his profile sharp against the cityscape. His eyes, fixed on the distant horizon, seemed to hold a universe of unspoken thoughts. I felt a strange pull, a current of curiosity drawing me towards him.

“What do you see out there, William?” I asked, my voice softer now, almost a whisper.

“The city.” His voice, flat. “People. Moving. Living.”

“And you?” I lowered the camera slightly, peering over the top. “Are you a part of that movement?”

He let out a short, humorless breath. “I haven’t left this apartment in a long time.”

My stomach dropped. “Oh.” The word slipped out. “Quarantine, then?”

He turned his head back to me, his gaze piercing. “Something like that.”

“It was… rough for a lot of people.” I offered, a quiet empathy blooming in my chest. “Isolation can really mess with your head.” I recall my own sorrow.

“It doesn’t mess with mine.” His voice was cold, a shield. “I prefer it.”

“Do you?” I challenged gently. “Or have you just gotten used to it?” I caught a subtle flinch, a tightening of his jaw. “There’s a difference, you know. Between wanting to be alone and being alone because it’s easier than facing whatever’s out there.”

He pushed off the wall, a sudden, abrupt movement. “You’re not a therapist, Est.”

“No.” I met his gaze, unflinching. “I’m a photographer. And to photograph the truth, I need to see it. Not just the surface.”

He stared at me, his eyes searching, almost hostile. I held his gaze, a silent battle of wills. The air crackled between us. Then his gaze softens.

“My mother died during quarantine.” His voice, barely audible, was raw, stripped bare. “Cancer. No one could visit. No one could say goodbye.”

The words hung heavy, suffocating the air out of the room. My heart ached for him, a sharp, sudden pain. “William…”

“Then my father remarried.” He continued, as if my sympathy was a foreign language he didn’t understand. “A woman half his age. From another country. A month after the funeral.” He let out a bitter laugh, a harsh, grating sound. “He moved her to our house. to my mother's home. With all ‘her’ things. So I moved out. Into this place. Alone.”

My camera felt heavy in my hands. The story. The painful, devastating story. I understood the absence now. The weight. Recalling my own history, my own suffering.

“That’s… a lot.” I said, my voice thick. “To go through alone.” My throat closing, my body feeling heavy.

“It’s fine.” He dismissed it with a wave of his hand, but his eyes, those cold, winter eyes, held a deep, unyielding sorrow. “I prefer it. No expectations. No disappointments.” then a smile that almost reached his eyes. “Although I have a little rat that brings me flowers from time to time, it helps me.”

“Expectations can be good, William.” I took a step towards him, then another, lowering my camera, letting it hang by the strap. “They can mean someone believes in you. Someone cares.”

“Caring means pain.” He turned away, walking back to the window, his back to me once more. “I’ve had enough pain.”

“And you think avoiding people will stop it?” I asked, my voice gentle but firm. “It just pushes it down. Until it explodes.”

He didn’t answer. The silence stretched, a vast, uncomfortable space. I wanted to reach out, to touch his arm, but I knew he’d recoil.

“Okay.” I said, regrouping. “Let’s try something different. Do you have any of your paintings here? Something you’re working on?”

He pointed to the draped easel. “It’s not finished.”

“Perfect.” I walked over, my curiosity piqued. I reached for the cloth, but hesitated,

looking at him. “May I?”

He gave a curt nod. Seeming a little more open once again.

I pulled back the canvas. It was a maelstrom of dark blues and grays, streaks of white like lightning scars, and at its center, a blurred angel, impenetrable black. It was beautiful, terrifying, and utterly heartbreaking.

“Wow.” The word escaped me, a soft gasp. “This is powerful, William. It’s all the things you just told me. All the pain. All the absence.”

He stood beside me, his gaze fixed on the canvas. “It’s just paint.”

“No.” I shook my head, my eyes still on the artwork. “It’s more than paint. It’s you. On a canvas. Laid bare.” I turned to him, a new idea sparking. “Let’s photograph you with this. Not just ‘you’, but ‘you’ and your truth.”

He looked at the painting, then at me, a flicker of something, perhaps intrigue, in his eyes. “How?”

“Stand beside it.” I instructed, my voice filled with a renewed energy. “Like it’s a reflection. Like you’re seeing yourself in it.” He moved, slowly, positioning himself next to the easel. His posture was still rigid, but there was a subtle shift, a vulnerability in his stance as he faced his own creation.

“Now, look at the painting.” I raised my camera. “Don’t pose. Just react. What does it make you feel?”

His eyes traced the dark swirls, the angry slashes of color. A muscle twitched in his jaw. His gaze softened, just a fraction, a raw emotion swimming in their depths. I clicked the shutter, capturing the moment.

“Good.” I murmured, encouraging him. “Keep looking. Let it speak to you.” He remained silent, lost in the canvas. I moved around him, finding different angles, capturing the interplay of his stoic presence and the turbulent emotions on the artwork.

“Tell me about your painting process, William.” I prompted, wanting to keep him engaged, to keep that fragile connection alive. “Do you listen to music? Do you just feel it out?”

“No music.” He finally spoke, his voice a low monotone. “Just… the silence. And the thoughts.”

“What kind of thoughts?” He hesitated, then sighed. “The ones that keep me awake.”

My heart squeezed. “Insomnia?”

He nodded, a weary slump to his shoulders. “Pills. Alcohol. Therapy. Nothing works.”

“And painting?”

“It helps. For a while.” He finally looked away from the canvas, his eyes finding mine. “Until I finish. Then it’s just another empty space.”

“But you fill it, don’t you?” I countered. “With another painting. Another piece of yourself.” I took a few more shots, the camera a quiet hum in the vast room. “You know, there’s a lot of talk about the starving artist, the tortured genius. But I think the real genius is the one who can take all that pain and turn it into something beautiful. Something that speaks to others.”

He scoffed, a short, sharp sound. “I don’t paint for others.”

“Maybe not consciously.” I smiled gently. “But your art, it’s out there now. People are seeing it. Feeling it. That’s connection, William. Even if it’s an accidental one.” He didn’t respond, but his gaze lingered on me, a curious intensity replacing the earlier hostility.

“You know,” I continued, sensing a shift, a softening, “I’ve been there. Lost. Adrift. Felt like the whole world was against me.” I lowered my camera, letting my guard down a little. “My own father kicked me out when I was eighteen. Found out I was gay. Said I was an abomination.” The words, usually kept locked away, spilled out, surprising even myself. “Slept on park benches for a while. Thought I’d never make it.”

He listened, his expression unreadable, but he didn’t interrupt. He just watched me.

“But I did.” I straightened my shoulders. “Scholarship. College. Photography. Found my own way. Found my own family, too, even if it’s not blood.” I met his gaze, a challenge and an invitation. “It’s hard, William. To let people in. To trust again. But it’s worth it. It truly is.”

The silence that followed was different now. Not hostile, not empty, but filled with a fragile understanding. He took a slow breath, his chest expanding, then deflating. “You… went through that?” His voice was softer, almost hesitant.

“Yeah.” I gave a small, wry smile. “Turns out, life’s a bitch sometimes. But it also gives you these incredible moments. These people.”

He looked around the empty apartment, then back at his painting, the flowers I hadn't noticed, then at me. “People are complicated.”

“The best things usually are.” I shrugged. “Like art. Like love. Like figuring out who you are.” I picked up my camera again, feeling a renewed sense of purpose. “Okay, William. Let’s try something else. I want you to sit down or lie down, On that rug.” I pointed to a plush, charcoal-colored rug near the window. “Just cross-legged. Like

you’re meditating. Or just being.”

He hesitated for a moment, then slowly, deliberately, lowered himself to the floor. He sat with his back straight, his hands resting on his knees, his eyes still holding that distant, guarded look.

“Good.” I snapped a few more shots. “Now, I want you to close your eyes.” He blinked, surprised. “Why?”

“Trust me.” I offered a small, reassuring smile. “Just for a moment. Imagine you’re… somewhere else. Somewhere peaceful. Somewhere you can truly rest.”

He looked at me, a flicker of uncertainty in his gaze, then slowly, his eyelids drifted shut. His face, usually so tense, softened almost imperceptibly. The harsh lines around his mouth eased. His breathing deepened. I wanted to get inside his head to find out what he longed for so much. I moved around him, my camera a silent companion. The light caught the curve of his jaw, the subtle tremor of his eyelashes. He looked vulnerable. And incredibly beautiful.

“What do you hear, William?” I asked, my voice a low murmur.

“Nothing.” He whispered, his voice surprisingly calm. “Just the hum.”

“And what do you feel?”

“The rug.” He murmured. “Cool air.” A pause. “And quiet.” I could see her eyelids tremble.

“Good.” I took another shot. “Just breathe. Let go of everything. The city. The past. The future. Just… this moment.” He remained still, his eyes closed. A profound stillness settled over him, a peace I hadn’t thought possible. He looked like he was finally, truly, resting.

I continued to photograph him, capturing the subtle nuances of his relaxed posture, the way the light played on his face. I felt a strange connection to him, a shared understanding of the burdens he carried.

“You know,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper, “sometimes the best way to find yourself is to get lost for a little while. And sometimes, the best way to connect with the world is to disconnect for a moment. To find that quiet place inside.”

He didn’t open his eyes, but a faint, almost imperceptible smile touched his lips. It was a fleeting thing, gone as quickly as it appeared, but it was there.

I kept talking, a gentle stream of consciousness, words of comfort, of shared experience. “I used to hate being alone. Thought it meant I was unloved. But then I realized, being alone can be a choice. A chance to recharge. To figure things out. And when you’re ready, you can open that door again. And the right people will be

there.” He shifted slightly, a soft sigh escaping his lips. His breathing was even, deep. He looked asleep.

My heart pounded a slow, steady rhythm. He was asleep. William, the insomniac, the man who hated human contact, had fallen asleep during a photoshoot, while I talked to him. I lowered my camera, my hands trembling slightly. I didn’t dare move. I just watched him, this beautiful, broken man, finally finding peace. The sunlight had shifted, painting golden stripes across his face. The silence returned, but this time, it was not empty. It was full of possibility. Full of hope. Full of a strange, unexpected tenderness. I stayed there, unmoving, for what felt like an eternity, just watching him sleep. The city hummed outside, oblivious.

After a long while, his eyes fluttered open. He blinked, disoriented, then slowly, his gaze found mine. There was no hostility now, only a soft, bewildered surprise.

“I… I fell asleep.” His voice was rough with sleep, a low, husky whisper.

“You did.” I smiled, a genuine, warm smile that reached my eyes. “Best sleep you’ve had in a while, I bet.”

He pushed himself up, slowly, his movements still a little groggy. He ran a hand through his hair, his eyes still wide with disbelief. “I don’t… I don’t understand.”

“Human connection, William.” I said, my voice gentle. “It’s a powerful thing. Even if you avoid it.”

He stared at me, his winter eyes now holding a spark of something new, something warm. Curiosity. Wonder. “You… you just talked.” He said, still trying to process it.

“Sometimes that’s all it takes.” I shrugged, my heart soaring. “To feel heard. To feel seen. To not feel so alone.”

He stood up, stretching his limbs, a long, deep stretch that seemed to shake off years of tension. He looked taller, somehow, lighter. “I… feel different.” He admitted, his voice still low, almost shy.

“Good different, I hope.” I packed up my camera gear, my movements slow and deliberate. I didn't want to leave, Hoping he would ask me to stay.

“Yeah.” He walked towards me, his steps no longer rigid, but almost fluid. He stopped just a few feet away, close enough for me to feel the warmth radiating off him. “Good different.” He looked at me, truly looked at me, and a faint blush crept up his neck. “Thank you, Est.”

“You’re welcome, William.” My stomach fluttered again, but this time, it was a joyful dance. “I think we got some incredible shots today.”

“I’m sure you did.” He paused, then took a deep breath. “Can you stay a little longer?”

My heart skipped a beat. “Oh?”

“Just talk.” He looked down at his feet, then back up, his gaze earnest. “I don’t… I don’t want to be alone right now.”

A wide, genuine smile spread across my face. “I’d like that, William. I’d like that very much.”

“Coffee?”

He offered a small, hesitant smile in return, a fragile thing, but real. And in that moment, under the golden light of the setting sun, I knew. This wasn’t just a photoshoot. This was the beginning of something. A connection. A hope. A love, perhaps, born from the depths of shared pain and the unexpected comfort of a stranger’s voice.

“Est.”

I turn. He’s standing in the middle of the vast, empty room, looking unusually younger. “Will you…” He swallows, the words a struggle. “Will you come back? Not to work. Just…to talk.”

The flutter returns, a whole symphony now. I nod, a single, sure movement. “Yes.”

As the sun set, washing the room in hues of pink and gold, two hearts began to heal together, united by their struggles, bound by the bittersweet reality of love—so fragile yet so powerful, illuminating the shadows they had both lived in for far too long.